



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

August 6, 2017

"Honest to God" - How to Pray Sermon Series

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Good morning! For those who might have joined us late, I'm Ron Mathieu, recently retired from full-time ministry but honored to be back in the pulpit.

This morning we're coming down the home stretch of an important sermon series we started last May on How To Pray. We've received a lot of positive feedback and the series seems to have resonated not only for how it's given practical advice on how to pray, but also in helping us explore more deeply what prayer is all about and how we can grow in this important spiritual discipline.

Wondering what else could be preached on the topic, I went back and listened to all of the sermons on our church website...and it was a rewarding deep dive into the subject of prayer:

Pastor Dan taught us, and many of us continue to practice, a fifteenth century technique introduced by Iganatius of Loyala called the Daily Examen.

Pastor Steve covered how to be more attentive to what God is laying on our hearts; Jenny on how prayers can move mountains; and Pastor Dan on how God communicates through scripture and how to deal with it when God seems to be on mute.

Pastor Tim reviewed how Jesus taught us to pray, and Chris on how the power of prayer can transform our communities, as well as us personally. And for the last two weeks Pastor Steve emphasized the importance of silence and solitude in our spiritual lives.

So as I was considering what's already been said about how to pray, it occurred to me that we haven't talked about prayers of confession.

And as much as Pastor Steve said it was ironic that he had to preach about silence, it's even more ironic for me to preach about confession.

You see, I had a traumatic experience in my childhood that affected my approach to confession into adulthood.

Like many in our congregation, I was raised as a Catholic. For Catholics, Confession is a major sacrament, like Baptism and Communion are for us. In fact, as a Catholic you're required to regularly go to confession and you can't receive Communion unless you've done so.

But for me, the confessional was frightening, almost like an upright coffin. It terrified me, not because I didn't want to confess my sins to God. But because I was

always worried that the priest would chew me out if he really knew what I'd done wrong. I'd often omit the worst stuff I'd done, and then the next time I went I would confess I hadn't told the whole truth.

When I was 13, my mother had been hospitalized for an extended time, so I just skipped going to confession altogether. My younger brother Dave and I discussed how all those sins were just piling up and up. To be safe, we agreed we'd both write a list so we could remember what to confess when we finally went—which eventually happened.

It was a Saturday night and there was a long line in front of and behind me. When it was my turn, I went in and knelt down in the confessional, unfolded my list, and although it was pretty dark I started reading:

"I'm sorry I disobeyed my parents, and for tattling on my sister, and for stealing some of my brother Ron's allowance, and..." And then I just blurted out: "Wait a second, this isn't my list!"

Well, the priest started chewing me out with a really loud voice and when I left the confessional everyone in line was glaring at me. I never went to confession again, until I entered seminary.

And they nearly didn't accept me because I had reservations about Confession as a sacrament.

In subsequent years, I underwent a more extensive examination of the topic on my journey to becoming a reformed follower of Jesus.

And although I'm now convinced we don't need a priest as an intermediary, I've reconciled that although true confession can be one of the hardest prayers to pray, it's also one of the most crucial elements of a healthy spiritual life.

In short, I've learned how important it is to be "honest to God."

This morning, as we continue in our How To Pray series, I'm hoping not only to examine this aspect of prayer, but also to introduce a slightly different take of what it means to confess.

This morning's Scripture is from the first letter of John chapter 1:8-2:2 (NRSV):

8 *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9* *If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10* *If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*

2 *My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; 2* *and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*

So when you think of the word "confession", what words or phrases come to your mind?

- Sin
- Guilt
- I admit I did wrong
- I'm sorry
- Forgiveness
- Accountability
- Punishment

The fact is we all mess up, whether in the eyes of the law, the eyes of other people, and the eyes of God. For some reason, it's not only in our nature to sin, but also seems to be in our nature to avoid admitting it.

One time when we lived in Georgia I had to drive my car just a few blocks from my house and although it was a "Click-it or Ticket" state I decided it was such a short distance I didn't need to fasten my seat belt.

I had no sooner pulled out of my driveway when a policeman pulled me over. As I watched him walking up to me in my rear view mirror, I slowly and clandestinely grabbed my seatbelt and clicked it into place just as he got to my car door.

So I rolled down my window and he said, "I was just checking to see if you had your belt fastened."

"Of course, Officer. I never leave home without buckling up."

And he responded, "Do you always put it through the steering wheel like that?"

And maybe that's just a humorous example of not 'fessing up, but for many it's a natural tendency to deny, cover up, or try to shift blame rather than admit guilt.

It turns out there's lots of solid evidence that burying guilt, especially that associated with sin,

can have a big impact on our lives and our relationships.

The Bible has a lot to say on this subject.

Psalms 32, for example, offers us several powerful reasons to confess our sins and shows us the consequences of not doing so.

In this psalm David first acknowledges how coming clean (an interesting expression we use for confessing) can be a blessing:

"Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit."

By contrast, the next two lines describe how miserable he felt by holding back: *"For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer."* Psalm 32:3-4

He's exhausted; he's drained of all strength; he's "wasted" down to his very bones!

We all sin, but when we "don't come clean" we feel dirty and ashamed and can experience guilt and depression and brokenness.

David expresses this more poignantly after he commits adultery with Bathsheba.

In Psalm 51 he cries out his guilt and laments that his guilt won't leave him: *"Have mercy on me, O God... wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin... For I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me."* Psalm 51:1-3

And he goes on to recognize how his confession to God cleans the slate in a way that nothing else can: "Surely you desire truth in the inner parts" meaning not just superficially.

"Cleanse (the Hebrew translates literally "un-sin me") me with hyssop, and I will be made clean; wash me and I will be whiter than snow." Psalm 51:6,7

David was a man after God's own heart yet he messed up as badly as anyone. But he also knew the wisdom of turning to God and candidly acknowledging his sin as the only way to get his life back on track.

"But Ron," you might be wondering, "if God knows our transgressions, why do we need to confess what we've done?"

Prayers of confession are not ways we inform God of what we've done. He already knows. This has been so all the way back to Adam and the story of man's first sin.

By sinning, Adam and Eve felt shame, lost their innocence, felt compelled to cover their nakedness, and tried to hide from God.

And when God called to Adam and asked, "Adam, where are you?" God didn't need to know his physical location...He wanted Adam to be aware of his spiritual condition, and that he had moved away from God.

And He still asks this same question of us: "Where are you?"

Confession is for our benefit, not God's. It is a humility issue. When we confess we acknowledge that we need God.

Christian writer Frederick Buechner puts it this way: "To

confess your sins to God is not to tell [God] anything [God] doesn't already know. Until you confess them, however, they are the abysses between you. When you confess them, they become the bridge."

In Psalm 32:1-5 David goes on to say: "*I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.*"

We all sin, and when we do, we experience guilt and shame, depression and brokenness. But when we come to Jesus and confess our sins, we experience cleansing, joy and healing!

So my first point is: **We have to be honest to God.**

He already knows our sins, so when we pray to confess it isn't *for Him* to learn what we've done! It's *for us* to recognize that what we've done has created a chasm, a separation from Him, and it's our fault.

My second point is: **In order to be honest to God, we first have to be honest with ourselves!**

In today's passage, the apostle John says: 8 "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us..." **10** "*If we claim we have not sinned, we make [God] out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.*"

Maybe it's just me, but many times when I sin, I don't really want to admit to myself that I've done something wrong. I'd rather cover it up, or blame it on someone else, or on circumstances beyond my control. We even kiddingly say, "The devil made me do it." Does that ring a familiar tune?

I think at a very deep level we have to be willing to admit that we've done something wrong, and recognize that the lies we try to convince ourselves of are the roadblock to feeling God's forgiveness.

And feeling unforgiven, whether by God or someone we've wronged, or even not forgiving ourselves...is without a doubt the source of many problems like depression, anxiety, stress, broken relationships, and problems with alcoholism and other substance abuse.

Buechner says: "The first step to receiving God's forgiveness... is to admit that we need it."

And as Pastor Steve reminded us last week: "We can't fix what we don't face; and we can't overcome what we overlook."

In order to be honest to God, we first have to be honest with ourselves. When we're not—when we deny having sinned—we also deny the forgiveness that God has given us, the forgiveness that Jesus paid for with a very high price: His horrific death on the cross!

There's the story of a man who always ended his public prayers with, "Lord, clean the cobwebs out of my life." But his life never changed. Week after week he prayed that same prayer.

One member of his small group got tired of hearing it so the next time the man prayed for the Lord to clean the cobwebs out of my life his friend added, "And Lord, please kill the spider."

Prayers of true confession don't gloss over the real issues.

"Lord, I'm really sorry my wife made me so angry."

That's like Adam and Eve saying, "The snake made me do it."

It's human nature to hide our sin from ourselves and from others.

Mark Twain contended, "We are all like the moon...we have a dark side we don't want anyone to see."

If you find it tough be honest with yourself, pray for God to reveal your sin so that you can honestly confess it. Hey, this is a series on how to pray and yes, I just advised that if you are having trouble with praying confession, it's okay to pray for God to help you!!!

It's what David did. In Psalm 139 he prays, *"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."* Psalm 139:23-24

God wants us to honestly see ourselves so that we can be spared the consequences of our sinful choices.

By the way, sinful choices aren't just *doing* things that are offensive to God. Knowing the right thing and *not doing it* also separates us from God.

When we studied the book of James we learned that: *"Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins."* James 4:17

Wow, that kind of sounds like we're damned if you do and damned if you don't! But stay with me, the Good News is yet to come.

For many of us a prayer of confession is a prayer in which we say, "I'm sorry Lord, I messed up, and I ask for your forgiveness."

It's okay to ask for forgiveness, but it's not necessary to ask for forgiveness. The Good News is that Jesus died so that our sins would be forgiven, and they already are independent of anything we do or say!

So here's my third and really important point, maybe the most important one I want to make this morning:

Confession is essential, not *to receive* forgiveness, but *to fully experience* the forgiveness God provided through the death of Christ and to realign ourselves for a right relationship with Him.

One writer put it this way: "Confession of sin is the soil in which forgiveness flourishes."

Too often we know we've sinned but aren't honest to God about it because we aren't aware...or maybe don't believe... that He HAS forgiven us!

I read a story about a pastor who carried the burden of a secret sin he had committed many years before. He was torn with guilt and had no sense of God's forgiveness.

In his church was a woman who claimed to have visions in which she spoke with God and He with her.

The pastor decided to test her and he said, "The next time you speak with the Lord, I want you to ask Him what sin your pastor committed while he was in college."

The woman agreed.

A few days later the pastor asked, "Well, did God visit you in your dreams?"

"Yes, He did," she replied.

"And did you ask Him what sin your pastor committed?"

"Yes."

"Well, what did He say?"

"God said, 'I don't remember.'"

Our salvation, and our forgiveness, is through faith in what Jesus did. And it's in that sense that I want to look more closely at how and what we confess when we pray.

The word "confess" as used in scripture, especially in the New Testament, is translated from the Greek "homo-logeo" which is made up of two parts: homo = same and logeo = to speak.

So the English word that's translated as "confess" in our Bibles originally means "to say the same thing," or "to be in agreement with."

It doesn't imply an admission of wrongdoing so much as "being in agreement with"...conforming *your* thinking to *God's* thinking. In other words, to be re-aligned with God.

I used to have a Toyota van that was badly out of alignment, and if I let go of the steering wheel I would get off course pretty quickly.

It wasn't too bad at first. My tires would wear out unevenly and more quickly, but I'd just replace them.

It would be okay for a while, but would still pull to one side and I had to correct it or I'd drift out of my lane toward oncoming traffic.

The crazy thing was that I knew just fixing the tire and constantly correcting my course didn't solve what was really wrong.

What I really needed was to fix the alignment to maintain the right direction!

It's the same with sin. Sin pulls us off the path God intends for us. And if all we do is change the tire, or just try through our own strength to yank back on course, we never straighten out our lives.

Confession is admitting that we realize we're "out of line"; that we need to "straighten out"; that we want to "homo-logeo", to be in agreement with God about our sin; that we recognize it IS sin. More importantly, that we're also in agreement with God that Jesus is the Lord of our life, and how amazing what He did was.

In this sense when we pray prayers of confession, we're not just confessing our guilt; we're confessing our faith.

It's interesting to me that Jesus' confession in this sense of the word was the justification for His condemnation and death on the cross.

Luke records that Jesus was brought before the chief priests and asked, "Are you the Son of God?" and He replies, "You are right in saying I am." (Luke 22:70)

His confession (in both a legal and spiritual sense) was saying the same thing: He was in agreement.

Presbyterians have a historical collection of statements of what we believe. Perhaps like me, you wondered why it's called *The Book of Confessions*, and this is the sense of the word "confession" that's meant in the title.

The Book of Confessions includes such statements as the Nicene Creed, the Apostle's Creed, the Scot's Confession and the

Westminster Confession of 1648. Some of these statements of belief go back as far as 180 AD!

It's what we mean when we sing, "Every knee shall bow, every tongue *confess*, that Jesus Christ is Lord."

It's what Paul means in his letter to the Roman church when he says, "If we *confess* with our mouth Jesus as Lord and *believe* in our heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, we will be saved." (Romans 10:9)

And it's what the apostle John underscores in this morning's scripture passage, "If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." 1 John 2:2

So when we confess in prayer, we should admit to God that we've sinned, and also declare we believe that through His death and Resurrection we are forgiven and restored in Him—realigned—on the same page. And can get on with living life in the fullness of Christ. Amen? Amen!

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com